



# Centering Peripheries: Flows and Interfaces in Southeast Asia

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## **Centering Peripheries Flows and Interfaces in Southeast Asia**

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The aim of this concept paper is to explore the spatial ecology of Southeast Asia. I do so from the perspective of cultural-geographical materialism in order to uncover some of the base structures and deep transformations of the region. This paper specifically looks into proto-typical binary oppositions between *upland* and *lowland* and the general socio-cultural features attached to the two geo-ecological niches. The paper first attempts to deconstruct the epistemological fixity derived from the static juxtaposition of social characteristics attributed to the two opposing niches, and then proposes alternative epistemology to better comprehend the dynamics of social change; the effect of the organizational power of the territorial state and the structural power of mercantilism and capitalism, which penetrate and connect hills and plains, and eventually destroy the structural binary between the two niches.

### **Upland and Lowland**

The following is the list of characteristics conventionally attributed to *upland* and *lowland* in Southeast Asia (Ishikawa 2005, cf. Buring 1965). The juxtaposition is based on such criteria as political status, economic development, demography, urbanization, agricultural mode, social mobility, the civilization's worldview, religion, and kinship system. The characterization derived from mainland Southeast Asian ethnography is also relevant to the insular Southeast Asian context, especially to Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, and parts of the Philippines.

| Lowland                    | Upland                          |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| political center           | political periphery             |
| development                | underdevelopment                |
| majority                   | minority                        |
| urban                      | rural                           |
| irrigation-based           | environment-dependant (swidden) |
| sedentary                  | mobile                          |
| great tradition            | little tradition                |
| world religion             | animism                         |
| laterality-based (kindred) | lineality-based (descent group) |

Source: Ishikawa, N. "Introduction" a paper presented at Japan Consortium for Area Studies Symposium "Toward the Structural Understanding of *Upland* vs. *Lowland*", Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan, July 9, 2005.

The model is, in short, nothing but an exemplary case of "lived essentialism" to Southeast Asian scholarship (Scott 1999) and has long been regarded as problematic, as this simplifying narrative constrains scholarly analysis (Walker 2006). In the following, I shall first critically review the binary understanding of regional characteristics and further suggest new analytical arenas and approaches.

## Centering Peripheries

In the conventional view regarding the power relation between lowland and upland, upland tends to be a fixed passive periphery. Such a view often fails to investigate the dynamic responses to the center by the periphery itself as well as active agencies on the ground. The understanding of upland-lowland interaction requires an alternative framework which goes beyond a one-way diffusionist treatment of power.

To bring the structuralist treatment of spatial ecology back to the empirical ground of Southeast Asia, a multitude of questions can be asked: how has the process of state formation affected the upland/lowland dichotomy? What is the nature of upland/lowland relations under transnationalism inherent in all border societies? How does the migratory expansion of a particular ethnic group change the landscapes of both upland and lowland? What are the functions of the two-way traffic of social flows

channeling the state power, commodities and labor both to upland and lowland? What kind of eco-tones, social interfaces, and commodity chains are observable between the two geo-ecological niches, and what are their implications to the study of the upland-lowland relationship?<sup>i</sup>

In the examination of these issues at stake, what is particularly important is that attention is paid to both social niches connected by and mechanisms connecting upland and lowland. Below I shall take up the issue of *social flows* and *interfaces* respectively.

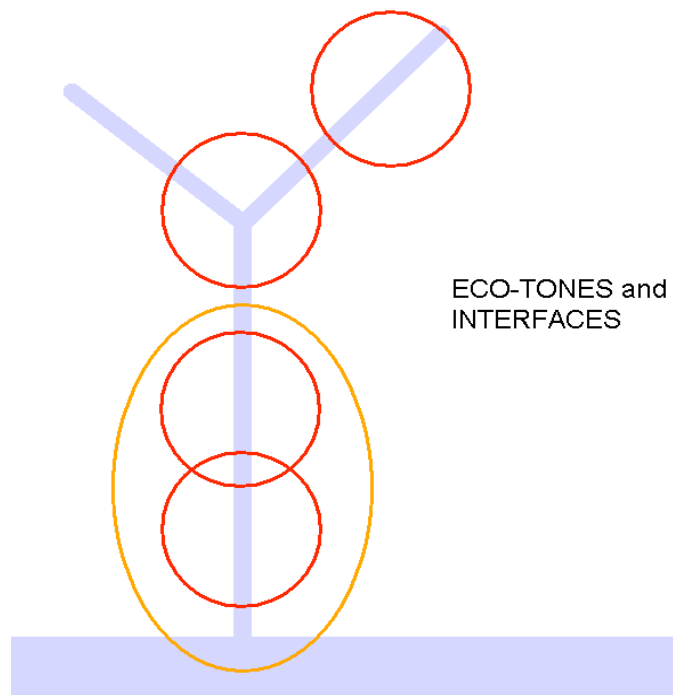
### **Flows and Interfaces**

To comprehend the basic nature of highland-lowland interactions, we should pay particularly close attention to the dynamics of the socio-economic forces at work at these interfaces, generated by the organizational power of the state, the structural power of mercantile wealth and capitalism, and the social agency of local people. There are two kinds of spaces which function as pathways of power, people, and commodity. The first is generated between lowland and upland and the other between an upland area and another upland area across the border.

### ***Riverine Axis***

There are a couple of social interfaces in Southeast Asia, where the movements of people and commodities intensify. The interface generated between lowland and upland is such a case. This case functions as a two-way corridor for the downward movements of people and commodities to a coastal market as well as an upward movement of state power to the upland (cf. Bronson 1977). Before terrestrial road networks became the dominant mode of connecting people and goods between upland and lowland, riverine networks functioned as the main channel of social movements. A river basin is a unitary social field, which constitutes an organic whole penetrated, connected, and structured by a major stream axis as well as a number of tributaries. Understanding such riverine spaces is important to understand the essential nature of Southeast Asian society. Scant attention, however, has been given to this in

the ethnographical studies, as researchers have been more concerned with the study of a single village community, an ethnic group, or a specific ecological niche. The study under this guise is a new attempt to reformulate the unit of analysis in order to better comprehend the dynamics of upland-lowland interactions. This will be accomplished by shifting the analytical reference point away from closed units and expanding it in both time and space.



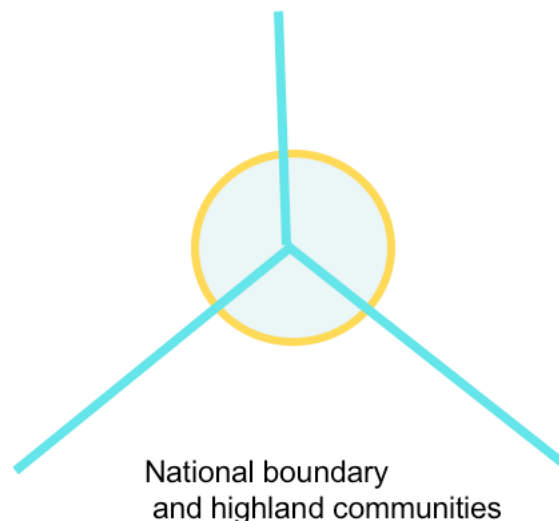
It is important to note that river-based commons not only constitute a spatially specific ecological unit but also a historically inscribed social space where people's social interactions accumulate to construct a conscious whole. A basin society developed along a river system is the origin of primordial identity. Such a sense of belonging often precedes structures of feeling based on nationally prescribed ethnic category and nationalism disseminated from the political center<sup>ii</sup>.

It is thus crucial to comprehend how such river-based eco-historical complexes have evolved under the influence of larger socio-economic forces. Social flows within the river system reflect changes in the national order of things, the capitalist production system, and the global market trend. They are never uniform and

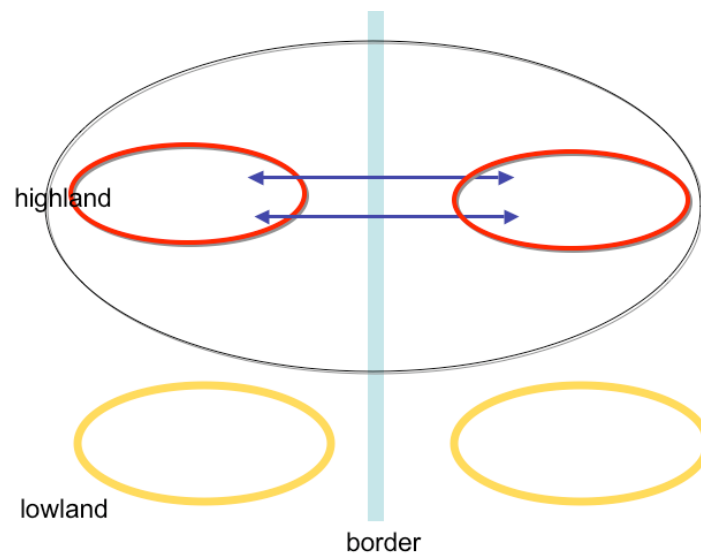
have undergone qualitative as well as quantitative transformation over time. Basin societies have witnessed both upriver and downriver social movements in their history of human settlement as well as national development.

### ***Borderland***

Simplifying multifaceted social relationships into a center-periphery dichotomy poses yet another problem. Upland remains a geographical periphery in a spatial unit inclusive of hills and plains, so long as the existence of such national territory is presupposed. While the state attempts to encroach upon people and commodities within its territory, transnationality is an everyday affair in the upland where people divided by national territories often share common parochial histories, memories and kin relations. When one focuses on the cross-border flows and movements, the peripheral region is in fact central to the analysis of social interaction beyond the legal framework of the sovereign states. Regarded as illegal by the state authority but licit by local societies, the transnational flows connect and penetrate the center-periphery juxtaposition, adding a new niche to the upland/lowland power relations.



The space between lowland and upland becomes a special threshold accommodating a series of social, economic and cultural flows both from upland and lowland, where things are no longer what they were, but not yet what they will be. Located at out-of-the-way places in the national territory, upland often shares a border zone(s) with other highland communities across the border. In such a liminal zone, the nature of things is inevitably transformed under the organizational power of the state (manifested as customs, border checkpoints etc.) and structural forces (manifested in daily life as the difference in currency exchange rates). Value is added, for instance, when commodities are smuggled across the national boundary, or when laborers cross the border from an economically challenged nation to one that is well-off.



A border zone between national terrains creates, channels, truncates, and regulates the flows of people, goods, capital, ideas, practices, institutional and organizational forms, and technologies, marking the frontier and its role as a transit point, a suitable arena for examining the genesis of liminal space and its relation to the state. As a transitional space, a border zone is both part and distinct from the territorial state. Victor Turner wrote that the character of “anti-structure” is inherent and not a structural reversal, but “the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition,

creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses” (Turner 1982:44). Such a borderland is simultaneously a stateless space where the authority of government is constantly challenged by local residents, not as a political act but as part of daily life. As such, the relations between upland and lowland simply escape conventional state-society oppositions as well as subsumption of the state into society (cf. Migdal 1988, 2004). Thus state-society relations as reflected in the upland-lowland interaction should be examined empirically as an everyday process of threshold construction between hills and plains.

At issue are the national order of things reflected in the state’s inscription of territoriality and mobilization of labor --- the singularization and denial of national affiliations of people and commodities through immigration and custom regulations, and the formation of social identity grounded in the spatial demarcation of administrative villages, ethnic communities, and the national territory. While policy implementation is a primary focus, social agency and strategic responses to the state’s policies also figure prominently.

The examination of state-society relationship at the fringe of national space is highly relevant to the general process of nation-state making in Southeast Asia. Ever since Max Weber described the nation-state as “a compulsory association claiming a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory”, territoriality has been a basic prerequisite for the existence of the nation-state (Weber 1958:77). The classical definition leads to treatment of the organizational development and spatial formation of the state as two separate but not equally theorized processes. Social meta-narratives provided by modern social theorists concentrated on processes of temporal change, while keeping spatiality constant. The processes through which the territoriality of the state is recognized and the nation spatially arranged within a prescribed territory are taken as established theoretical facts rather than a proposition to be examined.

Theory generated from a thinly populated, environment-dependent ecological niche with a porous border presents a view of state-society relations that differs from theoretical constructions of the nation-state in lowland, but has close parallels throughout the Southeast Asian region and elsewhere, where the way of life has long been non-sedentary, non-territorial, and transnational. The “location work” of the

people moving back and forth between upland and lowland as well as across a territorial boundary, that is, the quotidian decision-making on the affiliation of people and things, is deeply associated with the position of people as villagers, ethnic groups, and nationals vis-à-vis a series of geo-bodies trying to put political, economic, and socio-cultural grids upon them (cf. Appadurai 1996).

Attention to the permeability of people, commodities, capital, ideas, and practices as they move across the categorical boundary between hills and plains as well as physical boundary of the territorial state leads us to look into counter-flows of institutional and organizational forms of governmentality. It directs our attention to the manner in which flows have been both generated and regulated over time and across space. The idea of flows and movements thus grants equal weight to the determining role of structural power, institutions, and organizations. Simultaneously looking at separation and linkage as well as severance and articulation at the interstices between hills and plains, we are able to take another look at power relations in a processual way.

### **Heterogeneity of the Nation**

Discussions of nation-making have long pondered over issues regarding the state project of incorporating and homogenizing people under state territorialization. However, such constructionism often lacks critical attention to the resistance and maneuvering of people against social dislocation, peripheralization, and fragmentation. Due attention to the social heterogeneity observable at interfaces is conducive to a better understanding of the social processes of a nation-state in the making.

One of the issues at stake is the identity of those who must live within a nationally bounded dominant social order from which they are nevertheless ignored, marginalized, or obliterated altogether. How has a border village in the interior of Borneo and highland Burma become what it is today, an isolated enclave? Why have the villagers been differentiated from the dominant group in lowland and regarded as non-authentic members of the nation? How do they acknowledge “national space” and “village space” in their environs? What are the consequences of their actions as agents in relation to the structural determinants that surround them? The heterogeneity of the nation, or the uneven expansion of the nation, is an important issue that is often overlooked in the

study of nation making and unmaking. This issue can only be handled by simultaneously taking chronology and space into consideration. “Differences in location and timing, as well as in the nature of socio-cultural segments and their activity systems, would render the process of national incorporation uneven. It is more likely that the outcome would favor the rise of heterogeneous social arrays than the development of homogeneous national or sub-national totalities” (Wolf 1999:12). One of the important questions we should ask is how the upland villagers consciously and often positively locate as well as dislocate themselves in such national and ethnic categories in a community geographically distant from the center of the state, isolated from the waves of urban-based social mobilization and the dissemination of the national order of things (cf. Tsing 1993, 1994).

### **Organizational Power and Structural Power**

The upland-lowland model is, as discussed in the previous sections, characteristically ahistorical and static, thus inadequate to look into social change over time. The agencies of the state, mercantilism, capitalism, and the complex force of neoliberalism have no relevance to the binary frozen in structuralism.

Mercantilism and capitalism not only articulate upland with lowland in a national terrain but also connect hills with other hills across the national border. They directly affect the affiliation of people and commodities to the state and the mode of deployment of social labor for production. To examine the interaction between upland and lowland as a field of dynamic tension, it is useful to resort to a set of concepts, namely the *organizational power* exercised in the state’s spatial encroachment and consolidation, and the much larger *structural power* organizing and orchestrating operating units for organizational power at work (cf. Wolf 2001:383-397). The relation between upland and lowland should be examined as a point of articulation between the two forces; organizational power is responsible for the formation of the nation, labor mobilization, and production in the state territoriality, and structural power operates for the capitalist and mercantile expansion where transnational nature at work has symbiosis with upland communities.

I argue that the upland region has a better affinity with structural power rather

than the organizational power of the state. Structural power “not only operates within settings or domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the distribution and direction of energy flows” (Wolf 2001:384). It emerges when the changing forms of capitalism engage local social formation, which is closely related to the emergence and transformation of communities, social flows, and market places at the margin of the state. Peripheral communities seek symbiotic relationships with larger forces such as transnationalism and globalization and act as central hubs where trans-border interactions are norm rather than exception.

### **Hills vs. Plains and Beyond**

Geo-ecological binary opposition can be found elsewhere in the world. *Maritime* vs. *terrestrial* and *landmass* vs. *island-zone* are just a few of such examples. Although the focus of this paper is limited to Southeast Asia, there is a possibility of expanding the scope further to incorporate Slavic, Latin American, and African regions for the purpose of a comparative analysis. For instance, contrary to the Southeast Asian case, Latin American spatial ecology suggests that civilization located in high altitude did not descend to lowland. In the Slavic world, on the other hand, the political center has been historically established between hills and plains, halfway up a mountain. Africa does not seem to present a historically inscribed spatial ecological binary.

The binary opposition such as maritime vs. terrestrial and landmass vs. island-zone would yield another sets of aggregate of social characteristics. For each set, it would be necessary to carefully identify organizational power, structural power, social interfaces, border zones and social flows at work, which all connect, penetrate, and dismantle binary oppositions between these social spatial-ecological niches. The conceptual binary possesses utility by itself, but it is up to us whether or not we can put it into good use.

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<sup>i</sup> In a hill-plain binary mode, we presuppose a structural whole based on a constellation of contrasting social features. Such a characterization inevitably leads to the static picture of a social space, in which the interconnectedness as well as causal relationship among ecological, economic, demographic, political, and cultural features remain obscure. As J. Steward argued more than half a century ago in *Theory of Culture Change: the Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*, societies possess the constellation of features most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements. The *cultural core* includes:

Such social, political and religious patterns as are empirically determined to be closely connected with these arrangements. Innumerable other features may have great potential variability because they are less strongly tied to the core. These latter, or secondary features, are determined to a great extent by purely cultural-historical factors --- by random innovations or by diffusion – and they give the appearance of outward distinctiveness to cultures with similar core. Cultural ecology pays primary attention to those features which empirical analysis shows to be most closely involved in the utilization of environment in culturally prescribed ways (Steward 1955:37).

With the expansion of state power, mercantilism and capitalism, the fundamental social arrangements most closely related to the *cultural core* change. People’s strategic decisions to maximize social, economic, and political resources also alter their activities. The binary model inhibits a processual approach, thus neglecting the investigation of external factors affecting the social features and causal relationships among them.

<sup>ii</sup> Riverine society is also a politically charged historical space. The geo-political division of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, which drew an arbitrary boundary on the terrain of maritime southeast Asia, also divided Borneo into a set of riverine world along its watershed (see. Ishikawa *forthcoming*).